

“An Excellent Life”
1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13
June 2, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

We’re going to be setting aside our study of Matthew’s Gospel this summer in order to focus our attention on 1 Corinthians 13, one of the more well-known chapters in the Bible. I have wanted for us to spend some time in this eloquent passage about love for several reasons. First, Jesus said that love for God and for neighbor are the two most important commandments in the Bible. We should pay attention to everything Jesus says, but especially when he highlights something by saying that it is more important than all else.

A second reason for studying this passage flows out of the first. Because this is the greatest commandment, love is the central part of our mission statement as a church. This mission statement can be found on the back page of your bulletin every week: “Loving God and loving others as we are transformed by his love.” We understand a mission statement to describe what God calls us to do, while a vision statement describes what only God can do. Our vision statement is to be “a community of Christ’s coming kingdom, bringing hope to a broken world.” If you put those two statements together, what you have is the fact that love is the central feature of heaven. We believe that God calls us to show people what heaven is like. We are to be a model home of heaven by our love for one another. The New Testament scholar, D. A. Carson, in a book on 1 Corinthians 12-14, said it like this: “The greatest evidence that heaven has invaded our sphere, that the Spirit has been poured out upon us, that we are citizens of a kingdom not yet consummated, is Christian love.” In his work on 1 Corinthians 13, the great preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards asked the question as to what makes the church like heaven. His answer: it is love.

A third reason I’ve wanted to study this passage is more personal. I need help in learning to love, and thought perhaps that you might as well. As I look back on my forty-four years of walking with the Lord, I can say that God has helped me grow in this area. I love God and my neighbor more now than I did forty-four years ago. But I can also say that he has shown me how very far I still have to go in learning how to love. So I look forward to making some more progress in this during these summer months. Today, we are going to do an overview of the entire chapter. Then, beginning next week, we are going to focus on the middle verses where love is described in detail.

I. Love Is Indispensable – v. 1-3

Though this chapter is often read independent of its context, it is important to remember that no text can be accurately interpreted apart from its context. The larger context of 1 Corinthians 13 is Paul's lengthy discussion of spiritual gifts. The Corinthian church seemed to be fascinated by this topic, particularly several of the more showy spiritual gifts. In particular, they were impressed with gifts such as tongues-speaking, prophecy, and the performing of miracles of healing. Paul did not criticize them for their interest in spiritual gifts, but he did tell them that some gifts were more valuable than others and that they were assigning importance to the wrong gifts. Their emphasis on tongues-speaking, Paul said, needed to be changed. It was a lesser gift that should not receive the attention they were giving it. Paul gives a ranking of these gifts in verse 28 of chapter 12, saying that apostles, prophets and teachers are the three highest, with tongues-speaking being last in the list. Then he tells them to **"earnestly desire the higher gifts"** (12:31). The last sentence of chapter 12 introduces our text. **"And I will show you a still more excellent way."** Paul is saying, in effect, "These clarifications of spiritual gifts may be necessary, but let's not lose sight of what is really important. Love is what is really important." Without love, Paul is going to say, you don't have Christianity. It is the indispensable mark of the Christian.

In the first three verses of the chapter, Paul makes this point by selecting four gifts and then asking us to imagine two things about these gifts. He asks us to imagine first the highest achievement possible with this gift, and then to consider this achievement without love. So he starts with the gift of tongues and asks us to imagine someone who can speak not only known human languages but the language of heaven as well. He is not talking about someone who is merely gifted in learning foreign languages, but someone who has the spiritual gift of tongues to an amazing degree. But Paul says that if this impressive gift is not accompanied by love, it amounts to nothing more than a loud gong or a clanging cymbal. It's hard to imagine anything more irritating than someone practicing their cymbal ringing in the same room with you. Words of love, no matter how eloquently stated, are not the same thing as really loving. True love is more than words. The words without the love are worse than no words at all—they are an irritation that makes you want to run screaming from the room.

Next on Paul's list is the gift of prophecy. He wants us to imagine someone who possesses this gift to an extraordinary degree, so much so that this person can understand all mysteries and all knowledge. Answers to age-old questions are given to this person. He is able to give a satisfactory answer to the question of why people suffer. He understands how God can be sovereign yet man still be responsible. He understands marriage and people well enough that he can accurately diagnose every marriage problem. Paul then joins this gift with the gift of faith, asking us to imagine someone who has the kind of faith Jesus spoke of, faith that could move mountains. This person would be a spiritual giant by anyone's standards. But even if these impressive gifts were

possessed, if not accompanied by love, Paul says that this person is nothing. The sense of that last phrase of verse 2 is “I become nothing.” In other words, the lack of love changes a person in all the wrong ways. It makes you into something you should not be.

The last gift Paul mentions is the gift of giving. Once more, he asks us to imagine the possession of this gift to an exaggerated degree, someone who gives away everything, including his body as a martyr. This last example is more striking than the first three because giving is such a Christ-like quality. But Paul says that it is possible to give without love, and to do so gains us nothing.

If Paul were writing this passage today, what things might he mention instead of these four gifts? They would be things to which we tend to assign high value, just as the Corinthians were assigning high value to the gifts he mentioned. So Paul might say something like, “If I become the most successful businessman ever, and give it all away for Christian and humanitarian purposes, but lack love, then it is of no value.” Or he might say, “If I become the most popular preacher in the world, publishing best-seller books and gaining an internet following of millions, but lack love, then I am a fraud.”

Several applications stem from these verses. First, love is to be valued more highly than giftedness. A highly gifted person who lacks love ends up doing more damage than good. Love is to be the context of all our words and actions. Let me give an analogy. Suppose a husband comes home and tells his wife that he has just won a contest, and his prize is four of the nicest wheels made for a car, together with four special tires to go on those wheels. He excitedly tells his wife that these wheels would otherwise cost \$2000 each, and the tires are rated to 160 mph and cost \$500 each. So his award is valued at \$10,000. So she asks him, “Which of our cars are you going to put these wheels on?” He replies, “Oh, these wheels and tires are worth more than either of our cars. I’m not going to put them on either car.” “Well, what are you going to do with them?” she wants to know. “I thought I would bring them in to our living room and put them on display here.” Giftedness apart from love becomes just as out of place.

Second, love is to be seen as the indispensable mark of the Christian. It distinguishes true Christians from all others. Everything else can be faked. You can learn to speak loving words and you can make yourself do loving actions. But the one thing you cannot do, apart from God’s enabling, is to have a loving heart. Where there is no love, there is no faith.

That invites a third application. We are called to evaluate our lives in light of this standard. I believe that is why Paul uses the first person singular pronoun. He doesn’t say, “If *you* have all faith but lack love, then *you* are nothing.” He says “I” because we all must evaluate ourselves against this standard. Is there love in your heart toward God and others? Have you ever done anything for God or for others that does not spring from self-interest?

While even the most mature among us are not perfect in their love, even the newest baby Christian is not without at least a seed of love.

II. Love Is Permanent – v. 8-13

The chapter concludes with language about the enduring value of love. Paul says simply **“Love never ends.”** Many other things do end, and Paul names a few. All the spiritual gifts the Corinthians were so concerned about will one day be no longer needed. Prophecy, tongues and knowledge are gifts for this life only. Many good things could be added to Paul’s list of things that will not endure beyond this life. Many honorable occupations will no longer be needed in eternity. The entire medical community will need some retraining, because as much as we appreciate you now, we will not need you. Love, on the other hand, will stand the test of time. Our lives for all eternity will be marked by love.

Paul gives two illustrations of this. He says first that it’s like the different values characterizing children in comparison to adults. When I was a child, I had a nice collection of baseball and football cards that was very important to me. I’ve changed. I don’t know what happened to that collection, and I don’t really care that much. An adult, knowing what he knows, would never want to go back and be a child again. When we come to understand that love is really important, everything else to which we have given ourselves will be like a child’s baseball card collection in comparison.

His second illustration is that of a mirror, which in those days did not produce the sharp image produced by today’s mirrors. It was often just a piece of metal that had been polished some, something like looking at your image on the side of a car. There is a big difference between seeing someone’s image through a poor mirror and seeing that person face-to-face in the bright sunshine. On the day we come to see things with clarity, love will prove to be of great value.

Paul says that there are two other virtues that will endure beyond this life: faith and hope. In what sense will faith endure after we see Jesus face-to-face? After all, we will no longer have to walk by faith when we can walk by sight. Faith has another sense in the Bible, though: the idea of trust. It is this element of trust that will endure forever. For all eternity we will have a deep intimacy with God marked by complete trust in him.

Hope will also endure forever. Hope is simply the confidence in a bright future. It is a wonderful thought to me to consider this. No one will lose hope in heaven. Even our best times in this life are somewhat marred by the thought they might so easily disappear. You’re having a great time on vacation, but it is never far from your mind that the end of the vacation is approaching. When we

think of our future in eternity, no dark clouds will ever mar our thoughts. It will only be, "Today has been the best day imaginable and tomorrow will be even better." And there will never be any fear that this is all going to end tragically. That is our hope, and all eternity will be filled with such joyous, life-giving hope.

All of this makes the final verse of the chapter more compelling. **"So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."** As great as faith and hope may be, love is greater still. Love will be the key feature of heaven because God is love.

CONCLUSION:

How does God impart to us this virtue of love? By first loving us. **"We love because he first loved us"** (1 John 4:19). You cannot love another until you experience being loved by God. Bryan Chapell tells the story of a young girl who brought home a chocolate teddy bear that she had acquired in a gift exchange at school. The very next day, while the girl was at school, her three-year old little brother went into his sister's room to eat her chocolate teddy bear. His mother walked in on him and caught him red-handed, with chocolate smeared on his hands and cheeks. As soon as he was caught, he melted faster than the chocolate had, sobbing his confession and saying how sorry he was. His mother told him that in spite of his being sorry for his offense, he would still have to tell his sister what he had done when she got home from school. The rest of the afternoon was pure agony for this little boy, as he sat pondering how his sister would react to the news that her treasured teddy bear had been eaten. When she finally got home, he ran to her and his tearful confession poured out of him like water from a failed levee. He said, "Sally, I'm so sorry, I ate your teddy bear." His sister had been looking for a chance to love her brother, so she said to him, "It's okay, Johnny, I will love you anyway and always." Though the tears still flowed, when she said that he began to giggle. He still felt shame at his actions, but now it was mingled with joy. It is only when we come to understand something of God's love for us that we will be empowered to love others.

This chapter, when rightly understood, leads us into all the right places. It gives us humility when we realize that we are unable to generate the love God says is indispensable. It gives us dependence on God to grant such love, and then it gives us this kind of love, which leads to an excellent life. May God grant you such an excellent life through humble dependence on him!